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California's Wild Trout Program

By Chuck Knutson

The Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) Wild Trout Program was established in 1971 when the California Fish and Game Commission (FGC) adopted a policy to designate certain waters of the state to be managed exclusively for wild trout. Streams and lakes designated as wild trout waters provide quality angling experiences - opportunities to fish in aesthetically pleasing settings where the waters are environmentally productive and have healthy trout populations. Wild trout waters must be accessible to the public and able to support wild trout populations of sufficient magnitude to provide satisfactory catches in terms of sizes and/or numbers of fish. Special angling regulations may be established for specified wild trout waters to sustain high quality fisheries.

Wild trout waters are managed principally by protecting, maintaining, and restoring aquatic habitat, and through special angling regulations where needed. No domesticated strains of catchable-sized trout may be planted in designated wild trout waters. However, hatchery-produced strains of wild or semi-wild trout may be used if necessary to supplement natural trout populations. Written plans guide management by identifying actions necessary to protect wild trout habitat, and to maintain or to enhance trout populations in designated waters.

Healthy wild trout populations exist throughout much of California's 18,000 stream miles and 3,580 coldwater lakes and reservoirs, but less than 5 percent of these have been designated as wild trout waters. Furthermore, many of the designated waters remain productive enough to be managed without special angling regulations.

Waters in the Wild Trout Program support some of the state's and nation's finest trout fishing. The program manages a variety of wild trout fisheries, from the premier northern California "spring creeks," including Hat Creek and Fall River, to challenging "tailwater" fisheries, such as the Lower Owens and Middle Fork Stanislaus rivers, and remote, west-slope Sierra canyon streams, such as the Middle

Fork Feather, Rubicon, and Upper Kings rivers. Recently, emphasis has been placed on adding "fast-action" streams like Golden Trout Creek and the Upper Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River, where anglers can catch many six to 12 inch trout in a short period of time.

What kinds of trout are there in California?

California is home to 11 species and subspecies of native trout. Coastal rainbow trout are the most common and most widely recognized by the angling public. Steelhead are the anadromous form of coastal rainbow trout. The California golden trout is our state fish. The other native trout are: Lahontan cutthroat, Paiute cutthroat, coastal cutthroat, Eagle Lake rainbow, Kern River rainbow, Little Kern golden, upper McCloud River redband, Goose Lake redband, and Warner Valley redband. Redband trout are found in many interior basins of the west and have been geographically isolated from coastal rainbow trout for thousands of years. A twelfth fish, the bull trout of the McCloud River, no longer exists in California.

Brook, brown, and lake trout are not native to California, but are well-established in many of our streams and lakes. Brook trout were brought into the state during the early 1870s. Brown trout were imported into California a little over a hundred years ago, and lake trout were stocked in California waters as early as 1885.

Native trout versus wild trout

There is often confusion over the meaning of "native" and "wild" trout. A California native trout is one that has existed in California since prehistoric times. Native trout possess adaptive traits acquired over thousands of generations to successfully cope with the unique conditions of their habitat. Many of California's native trout have been transplanted to places outside of their native waters, where they technically become non-native fish in those waters.

A wild trout is one that was born in the wild and completes its life cycle in the wild, regardless of the origin of its parents.

Thus, a wild trout can be either native or non-native. Transplanted or stocked non-native trout can acclimate to a stream or lake and successfully establish naturally-reproducing, self-sustaining populations.

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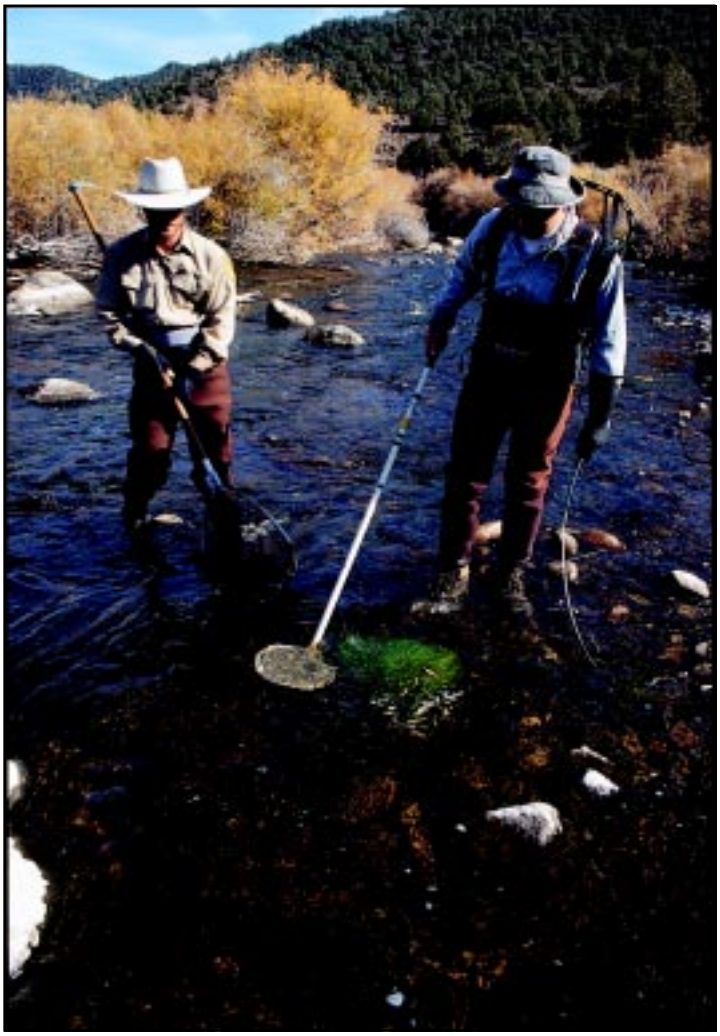
Trout stream surveys may produce species other than trout such as various species of perch others (above).

The Wild Trout Program biologists use electroshocking techniques for surveying wild trout waters.

DFG photos by Robert Waldron



A highly trained stream survey crew consists of several scientific aides who conduct the bulk of wild trout resource assessment, monitoring, and evaluation activities, with support from other DFG branch and regional field biologists, cooperating agencies, and volunteers.

In some cases, human assistance is necessary to maintain native trout populations. For example, long-term habitat declines in Pine Creek (the only available natural spawning habitat for native rainbow trout migrating from Eagle Lake) require that these fish be sustained by trapping and spawning the adults, and subsequently releasing hatchery-reared young back into the lake.

Catch-and-release waters

The enactment of the Trout and Steelhead Conservation and Management Planning Act of 1979 by the California Legislature added a complementary catch-and-release management aspect to the Wild Trout Program. Trout streams and lakes designated as catch-and release waters are managed with zero-, one-, or two-trout daily bag limits to encourage release of caught fish. This modified form of the catch-and-release concept is aimed at conserving trout production and increasing fishing quality by limiting harvest.

The law also promotes the use of minimum or maximum size limits and gear restrictions, where appropriate. The use of artificial lures with barbless hooks increases survival of released fish and has become very popular among many wild trout anglers.

California Heritage Trout Waters

A third component of the Wild Trout Program, California Heritage Trout, was launched in 1998 and highlights restoration, conservation, and angling activities relating specifically to the state's native trout. To achieve this goal, the FGC amended its wild trout policy to provide a means to designate trout streams and lakes featuring one or more of the state's native trout as California Heritage Trout waters.

Key features of this new program are education and outreach activities to promote public awareness and appreciation of the beauty, diversity, historical significance, and special values of California's native trout. These designated waters also provide unique opportunities to catch and observe the state's native trout species.

Streams and lakes designated as California Heritage Trout Waters must be located within the historic range of native trout. Heritage trout waters are subject to the similar selection criteria and receive the same management commitment as designated wild trout waters.

Wild Trout Program responsibilities

DFG's wild trout staff currently consists of two statewide biologists, a supervisor, and one biologist from each of the DFG's six geographical regions. A highly trained stream survey crew consists of several scientific aides who conduct the bulk of wild trout resource assessment, monitoring, and evaluation activities, with support from other DFG branch and regional field biologists, cooperating agencies, and volunteers.

Program staff conduct a statewide inventory of trout streams and lakes; collect and analyze trout population and habitat data on selected trout waters having potential for wild trout, catch-and-release, and/or California heritage trout designation; monitor designated wild trout, catch-and-release, and California heritage trout waters; assess the effects of angling and current angling regulations on designated waters; and prepare and update management plans for designated wild trout and California heritage trout waters.

Wild trout biologists conduct fish population surveys by electrofishing and visual counts by snorkeling. They also survey angling quality through direct angler interviews and by asking anglers to voluntarily report their fishing success on forms at angler survey box locations. Based on such evaluations, DFG develops specific recommendations to the FGC about designating specific streams or lakes as wild trout, catch-and-release, or California Heritage Trout Waters. This information also is used to establish management strategies to maintain quality fisheries in these waters.

Wanted: Two-minute volunteers

While you were out fishing, you may have noticed one of our brown metal volunteer angler access point survey boxes stationed near selected trout streams and lakes. The Wild Trout Program uses these survey boxes to collect information about trends in angling quality. As the list of wild trout, catch-and-release, and heritage trout waters continues to grow, it is not cost effective for Wild Trout Program staff to survey all of the waters in the program through direct angler interviews. Thus, we turn to anglers for assistance. While angler interviews are still conducted on selected waters, the survey boxes have become an important tool for monitoring and managing California's trout fisheries. The more anglers participate, the more useful the data become. *So, the next time you go fishing, if you see an angler survey box along the trail, please be sure to open the box and fill out a survey form when you are done fishing for the day. It only takes a minute or two.* The latest results for each water will soon be posted on our website at www.dfg.ca.gov. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

Sharon Shiba handles a trout collected during a survey.

White fish.

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Chuck Knutson is DFG's supervisor for the Wild Trout Program.